

the very mild weather prior to the date of capture. At Rothamsted, the highest mean November temperature for over 100 years was recorded and at Rhandirmwyn, minimum temperatures rarely fell below 10°C.

Waring, P. (1995, *British Wildlife* 6(4): 257-258) cites other early records including that of an *Orthosia gothica* on 12.xii.1994. This species also usually flies in March and April.

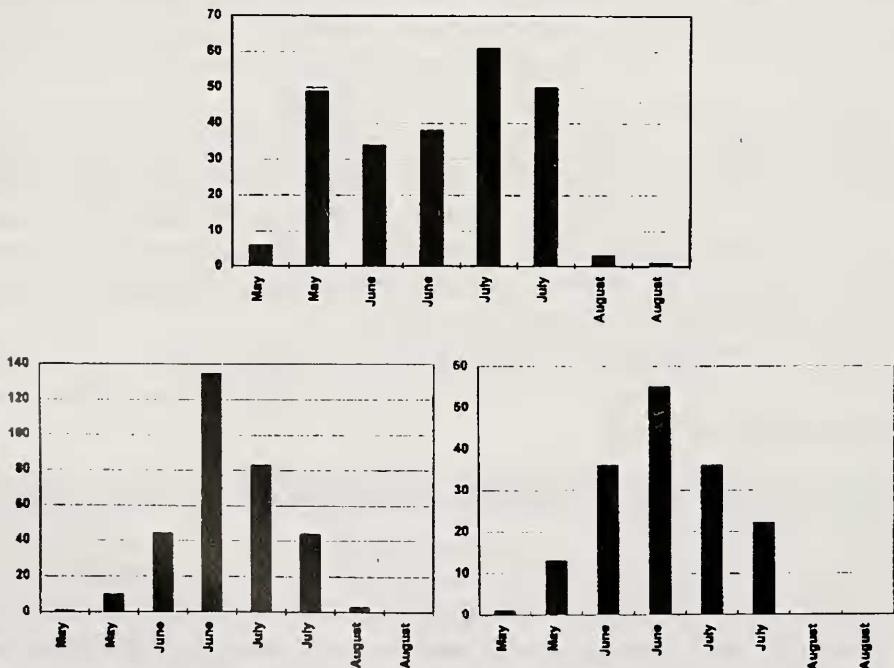
It would be of value to read of further unusual records resulting from the mild early winter weather of 1994 as they may give some indication as to which species are affected by such conditions and to what extent.

Thanks are extended to Mr David Davies and Mr Michael Tickner for operating the traps at Rhandirmwyn and Hamstreet, respectively.— ADRIAN M. RILEY, Department of Entomology & Nematology, IACR-Rothamsted, Harpenden, Hertfordshire AL5 2JQ.

A note on the flying times of *Laothoe populi* L. (Lep. Sphingidae)

Following the recent discussion of the voltinism of *L. populi* in the pages of this Journal by West (106: 41-45) and Spalding (106: 126), I examined my m.v. trap records from west Devon to see whether they added anything to the debate. They do not, as I rarely operate the trap late enough in the year, but they nevertheless show a curious monthly distribution pattern which seems worth placing on record.

The figure shows my 242 light trap records covering the period 1988-1994, with each month being divided into halves. This illustrates a clear



Trap catches of hawkmoths:

Top: *Laothoe populi*; Left: *Deilephila elpenor*; Right: *Sphinx ligustri*.

peak in the second half of May in addition to that expected in July. I took this to be a reflection on my somewhat erratic trapping pattern but to check, I analysed my records of *Sphinx ligustri* L. (163 records) and *Deilephila elpenor* L. (320 records), two other locally common sphingids that appear frequently in the trap with *populi*. These are also shown and indicate the expected type of distribution. This, surely, eliminates any sampling effects. My curiosity aroused, I re-examined West's and Spalding's data. The former show a minor late May peak in four of the ten years where full data are available (1987, 1989, 1991 and 1992), whilst Spalding's figure shows a somewhat later, minor peak in the first week of June. These observations are obviously inconclusive but suggest that this moth, in some years and in some parts of the country at least, exhibits an unusual pattern of emergence. Perhaps other readers will examine their own records to see how widespread this phenomenon is, or suggest an explanation.— R.W. BOGUE, Kingston House, Tuckermarsh, Bere Alston, Devon PL20 7HB.

Scarcity of Vanessid butterflies

I refer to the observation "The scarcity of Vanessid butterflies" by C.J. Smith (*Ent. Rec. J. Var.* **107**: 146), who I note is another resident of Sale, and who in particular makes a point that in a local sports field hostplant-habitat of *Aglais urticae* (Linn.) and *Inachis io* (Linn.) has been destroyed.

Close to my home is another sports field, Crossford, where I have done some studies on these species. It is owned by the local authority and is in the Mersey Valley. The eastern section of the field is on a slightly higher level than the western and the two sections are separated by a shallow north-south drain (SJ792930/1) in which, in spite of the grass either side being regularly mown, extensive beds of nettles are normally allowed to grow unhindered. Forming a west-facing bank, in early spring the drain receives the full rays of the afternoon sun, and forms a microclimate considerably warmer than the surrounding area. As a result, every year one or both of these butterfly species congregate here post-hibernation, sometimes in considerable numbers. It is generally accepted that *A. urticae* and *I. io* are highly mobile and do not form permanent breeding populations restricted to a small area, therefore I suggest that each year individuals moving through the Mersey Valley, probably from some distance, are able to single out this small site from the surrounding environment because of its combination of suitable features (chemical/ olfactory cues from the nettles; aspect; insolation level).

I find that this concentration of the butterflies occurs only in the spring – later in the year, when the ambient temperature in the Valley is higher, the need for the butterflies to seek out the warmest spots is less and they are more generally distributed.

Normally the spring sighting of adults is followed by the appearance of larvae on the nettles, though this does not occur every year – sometimes when *A. urticae* imagines have been abundant no larvae have been seen, and